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SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke

Indoctrination by the Smithsonian leaders on my Alaska tour took a short amount of time for such a big undertaking over such different climates and conditions. Tour members were widely traveled and involved in many different interests. Leaders were chosen for general knowledge of an area and their expertise as historians and naturalists.

On the first morning, checking out of Anchorage heading sort of Southwest toward the Kenai Peninsula, the group seemed fast at mounting the bus, until I clocked an old boy galloping across the lobby balancing a room service tray of milk and fruit, clinching the lid of cornflakes box in his teeth, at 27.8 miles per hour.

He looked like he was going to outrun his suitcase, but after auditing the prices of breakfast around town, the food was probably more valuable than his clothes and bag.

The first day's agenda was a river rafting trip on the Kenai River. Sixty to seventy percent of the rainfall in the state runs off in the rivers, especially where the permafrost is shallow. But, on our ride, about 20 to 30 percent more of the rain ran down our collars and soaked into the waistlines of our rain gear.

All summer guides use a litany of jokes to fit the day, or the crowd. Our oarsman was no exception, but he kept

thinking I was laughing at the wrong times, when actually my southern drawl makes the sound of my teeth chattering come out the wrong tone to Northerners.

The trip wasn't a flop. Mergansers ducks played in the sweep of the raft, and a big bald eagle scowled from her bankside nest.

At the town of Kenai, the motel had prepared a special buffet of halibut and salmon that'd been swimming in the Cook Inlet about five hours before. Action was so heavy on a big bowl of fresh lemon juice that the shell platter began to look like a brown pelican rookery.

The bad part came after dinner. The Smithsonian lady rose, smiled, and said, "Now we are all going to introduce ourselves and tell something about what we do."

I'd been dreading that all day. I wasn't about to admit in front of a group of educators and New York City advertising editors and all the rest of those specialists, I was a Texas sheepherder.

On the bus, two ladies had extolled what a comeback coyotes were making in Chicago and L.A. The day I'd left home I was feeding an old renegade all the lamb liver and heart she wanted. "Comeback" was about to swallow this cowboy and all his neighbors.

So to throw a cold trail, I told them I was an old buffalo hunter from the Chihuahua Desert in Texas and

Mexico. Unemployed, but still yearning once again to go back to a frontier like Alaska, smell black powder burning and feel a walnut rifle stock shoved against the bruised flesh of my shoulder, and watch the blue steel barrel of a long range rifle smolder in the heat of rapid fire.

An Eskimo kid, the champion fisherman of them all, never had a piece of bait work as well as that drama did. The next morning the bus was comfortable, but the rest of the party gave me plenty of privacy.